PROTESTANTISM AND PATRIOTISM

Ideologies and the making of English foreign policy, 1650–1668

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments		*page* ix
List of abbreviations		xi
1	Introduction	1
	Part I The rod of the Lord: ideology and the outbreak of the First Anglo-Dutch War	
2	Historiographical overview	11
3	The attempt at unification	15
4	The road to war	40
	Coda: the popular apocalyptic context	76
	Part II To unite against the common enemy: the 1654 Treaty of Westminster and the end of apocalyptic foreign policy	
5	Historiographical overview	83
6	The causes of the war stated	87
7	Peace proposed	101
8	Political upheavals and ideological divisions	115
9	The rejection of apocalyptic foreign policy	149
10	The Protectorate's new foreign policy	168
	Part III Popery, trade, and universal monarchy: ideology and the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Dutch War	
11	Historiographical overview	195
12	The establishment of an Orangist foreign policy	199
13	The Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1662	214

14 The Northern Rebellion and the reestablishment of Anglican Royalist consensus 222
15 The April 1664 trade resolution 237
16 Popery, trade, and universal monarchy 256

Part IV The Medway, Breda, and the Triple Alliance: the collapse of Anglican Royalist Foreign Policy

17 Historiographical overview 271
18 The circulation of news and the course of the war 276
19 The popular understanding of the war 289
20 The government's war aims 318
21 An Orangist revolution 331
22 Victory denied and wartime consensus shattered 343
23 The rise of political opposition 369
24 The road to Chatham: the decision not to send out a battle fleet 379
25 The demise of Anglican Royalist foreign policy 407

Conclusion 441

Bibliography 453
Index 486

1

Introduction

Seventeenth-century English foreign policy has more often been written off than written about. Domestic constitutional and social developments have dominated the recent historiographical headlines. Foreign policy's retreat from the stage of early modern English history has been so complete that one well-respected historian has recently challenged his readers to "ponder the question of how many English victories over continental powers you can name between the battles of Agincourt (1415) and Blenheim (1704)."[1] The lack of memorable English victories, John Brewer has implied, indicates the relative unimportance of seventeenth-century England on the European scene, and consequently the insignificance of the study of its foreign policy. Brewer's is not a unique assessment. "For three centuries before 1688, the English state had been unable to raise adequate revenues from taxes," Lawrence Stone has claimed in order to explain away the historiographical neglect of seventeenth-century foreign policy, "as a result of which [England] was no more than a marginal player in the European power game."[2]

Nevertheless seventeenth-century foreign policy was not always thought to be so marginal. Contemporaries thought of England as one of the great powers of Europe. Agents from Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, and France stood in line for favors from Oliver Cromwell.[3] "The sea is your own and now all nations greet / with bending sails each vessel of your fleet," bragged one panegyric to Cromwell, "your power extends as far as winds can blow / or swelling sails upon the globe may go."[4] This seventeenth-century national self-image was not soon forgotten. The English admiral

1 John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power* (London, 1989), pp. xiii–xiv.

2 Lawrence Stone, "England's Financial Revolution," in *New York Review of Books* Vol. 38 No. 3 (15 March 1990), p. 50.

3 Josselin, *Diary*, 24 January 1653, p. 295; Sagredo to Doge and Senate, 13/23 December 1653, *CSPV*, p. 160; Giacomo Quirini to Doge and Senate, 7/17 June 1654, *CSPV*, p. 224; John Thurloe to Bulstrode Whitelocke, 24 February 1654, in Sigismund von Bischoffshausen, *Die Politik des Protectors Oliver Cromwell in der Auffassung und Thätigkeit seines Ministers des Staatssecretärs John Thurloe* (Innsbruck, 1899), p. 168.

4 "A Panegyrick to Oliver Cromwell," in Bod., Rawl. Poet. 37, f. 119.

Robert Blake, for example, received high praise from many writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including from Samuel Johnson.[5] Blake, insisted one of his nineteenth-century biographers, William Hepworth Dixon, was the man "who had humbled the pride of Holland, Portugal and Spain, who had laid the foundations of our lasting influence in the Mediterranean, and in eight years of success had made England the first maritime power in Europe!"[6]

Victorian historians universally looked to the mid-seventeenth century for the foundations of Britain's rise to greatness. "After half a century during which England had been of scarcely more weight in European politics than Venice or Saxony," pronounced Lord Macaulay in his magisterial and elegant *History of England*, "she at once became the most formidable power in the world."[7] Sir John Seeley, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, insisted upon highlighting the contemporary political relevance of the history which he taught, comparing the age of Cromwell to that of Napoleon and that of Julius Caesar in its imperial importance. The Navigation Act which the Rump Parliament passed in 1651 – and which Seeley identified as the outgrowth of ideological rather than mercantile discontent with the Dutch – was "the act which laid the foundation of the English commercial empire." For Seeley the period from the Armada to the Glorious Revolution was critical in laying the groundwork for the growth of Britain; Elizabeth, Cromwell, and William III were his heroes.[8] Although English radicals of all classes in the mid Victorian era pointed to different heroes than did the liberal unionist Seeley, they too frequently recalled Cromwell's foreign policy with pride. For these radical men and women, the Cromwellian tradition committed England to defend liberty against tyranny in the international arena – a commitment which the radicals pressed upon successive British governments to fulfill in Hungary, in Italy, and in France.[9] No one can doubt that the Victorians had little trouble recalling seventeenth-century military heroes. In his *Child's History of England*, Charles Dickens used Cromwell's foreign policy as the yardstick by which to measure all future English statesmen. "Between you and me," Dickens remarked at the high water mark of England's informal empire, "England has rather lost ground in this respect since the days of Oliver Cromwell."[10]

[5] Samuel Johnson, "Blake," in *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (London, 1825), Vol. VI, pp. 293–309.

[6] William Hepworth Dixon, *Robert Blake* (London, 1852), p. 366.

[7] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England*, edited by Charles Harding Firth, (London, 1913), Vol. I, pp. 120–122.

[8] Sir John R. Seeley, *The Growth of British Policy* (Cambridge, 1922), *passim* and especially Vol. II, pp. 1–45.

[9] Margot Claire Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993), *passim*.

[10] Charles Dickens, *A Child's History of England and Miscellaneous Pieces* (New York, n.d.), p. 364.

In the recoil from Empire, however, the achievements of the seventeenth century have been made to look less grand. Far from being the progenitors of the Victorian Empire, English men and women of the seventeenth century have been presented as rarely looking beyond their own local communities. "The social and political life of the vast majority of Englishmen, even among the gentry," Alan Everitt has observed, "was lived almost wholly within the confines of their county – their 'country' as they significantly called it." Naturally enough, this outlook – an outlook which Everitt and others have insisted outlasted the temporarily centralizing forces of the Interregnum – was "insular and inbred," more interested in encroachments upon local communities than upon distant developments in Madrid, Paris, Vienna, or the New World.[11] This insularity was, according to Conrad Russell, reflected in the debates at Westminster. Members of the early Stuart House of Commons, he claims, "almost always put concerns for their own counties above any concept of the national interest." When pressed – and for Russell foreign policy was always pressed upon provincialist members of Parliament by more cosmopolitan courtiers – country gentlemen resisted involvement in continental politics because of the inevitable burden which extraordinary taxation would place upon their local communities.[12] This is not surprising, argues one prominent revisionist historian, because country gentlemen knew little and cared less about the international situation. They received and collected newsletters and pamphlets from London, to be sure, but the localist gentry were "almost invariably" more interested in "the success and failure of courtiers in their gambling enterprises, and the state of the London marriage market" than in great political questions or foreign policy.[13]

Foreign policy, in this reconstruction of seventeenth-century English history, is hardly worthy of study. The sense of purpose in England's foreign policies, the antagonism to Spain of the Elizabethan period, and the opposition to France of the Hanoverian period, "is lacking" in the international entanglements of the seventeenth century.[14] Most English men and women displayed a "conventional protestant nationalism" that only went skin deep.[15] Consequently England avoided war whenever possible. Though "by the end of the sixteenth century a popular consensus had been created in English politics that English foreign policy should be conducted to a

[11] Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion 1640–1660* (Leicester, 1973), pp. 13, 18. This view is endorsed by Anthony Fletcher in "The First Century of English Protestantism and the Growth of National Identity," in Stuart Mews (editor), *Religion and National Identity* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 316–317; and by John Morrill in *The Revolt of the Provinces* (London, 1976), pp. 19–23.

[12] Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621–1629* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 8, 70–84.

[13] Morrill, *Revolt*, p. 23.

[14] G. M. D. Howat, *Stuart and Cromwellian Foreign Policy* (New York, 1974), p. 1.

[15] The phrase is Morrill's in *Revolt*, p. 20.

greater or lesser degree in defence of the protestant cause on the continent," when the early Stuart monarchs resisted entering the Thirty Years War on the Protestant side, most people were unwilling to suffer the inconvenience of increased taxation required to support a Protestant crusade. Naturally the religious fanaticism which ultimately precipitated the Civil War, argue these revisionists, recast English neutrality in the Thirty Years War, a neutrality very much dictated by English insolvency, as part of the greater Popery of the court. In the minds of religiously committed men who directed the Parliamentary war effort against Charles I, the failure of the early Stuarts to assume the mantle of the Protestant cause was further evidence of their commitment to the cause of Rome. Consequently when the religious extremists, those aristocratic puritans who had opposed the government in the 1630s by forming the Providence Island Company, "moved into leadership, the goals of Providence Island Company investors finally became the goals of the national government."[16] Indeed, though there has been a spirited debate over the relative merits and demerits of Cromwell's foreign policy, all the participants have agreed that it was fundamentally Protestant.[17] Debates over foreign policy were really factional struggles within the aristocratic community, a community which was supposedly far more interested in religious issues than in foreign affairs. If English men and women outside Westminster pondered the world beyond their county communities at all, they thought about retreating farther away from it.

This understanding of foreign policy has carried over into the study of the Restoration. Politics in the Restoration, argues the most prolific commentator on later Stuart England, J. R. Jones, was based on "cynicism and opportunism."[18] The voluminous pamphlet debates of the Interregnum had little lasting effect upon ordinary English men and women. There was little politically informed public opinion. After the Restoration most members of Parliament "limited their mental and political horizons" once again to the "interests of their 'countries', that is their shires and neighborhoods." English political rhetoric after the Restoration, John Miller has contended,

[16] Here I am summarizing the arguments of Simon Adams in "Spain or the Netherlands? The Dilemmas of Early Stuart Foreign Policy," in Howard Tomlinson (editor), *Before the English Civil War* (London, 1983), pp. 79–101; and "Foreign Policy and the Parliaments of 1621 and 1624," in Kevin Sharpe (editor), *Faction and Parliament* (London, 1978), pp. 139–171. The analysis of Cromwellian foreign policy comes from Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Errand to the Indies: Puritan Colonization from Providence Island through the Western Design," in *William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 15 No. 1 (January 1988), p. 88.

[17] Menna Prestwich, "Diplomacy and Trade in the Protectorate," in *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (June 1950), pp. 105–121; Roger Crabtree, "The Idea of a Protestant Foreign Policy," in Ivan Roots (editor), *Cromwell: A Profile* (New York, 1973), pp. 160–189; Michael Roberts, "Cromwell and the Baltic," in *English Historical Review* Vol. 76 No. 300 (1961), pp. 402–446.

[18] J. R. Jones, "Parties and Parliament," in his *The Restored Monarchy* (London, 1979), p. 50. This is also the situation described by Ronald Hutton in *The Restoration* (Oxford, 1985) and *Charles II* (Oxford, 1989).

was "dominated by a violent and often hysterical anti-Catholicism."[19] Consequently when foreign policy was debated in Parliament "the quality of speeches rarely rose above the ventilation of prejudices and personal grievances."[20] When England did go to war between 1660 and 1688, it was because one court faction or another hoped to drum up support for its domestic political agenda. Only James II's bullheaded insistence on transforming the political structure of local communities to allow a larger political role for Roman Catholics brought England back onto the international stage on the Protestant side. And this was only because involvement in the war against Louis XIV was William III's price for intervention in English affairs.

In this construction of English history, then, little actually changed in the seventeenth century. Foreign policy remained the special preserve of the aristocracy. Few people cared about events outside their communities. When foreign affairs were debated in Parliament, it was usually because of the manipulation of a court faction. The majority of members of Parliament simply wanted to make sure that their localities would not have to pay higher taxes. Nevertheless it was easy enough for aristocratic troublemakers to stir up temporary waves of political sentiment by touching upon popular xenophobia. In times of crisis English men and women frequently rediscovered their Protestant nationalism. This has led Jonathan Scott to conclude that the "events, structures, and issues in the reign of Charles II ... are almost xerox copies of events, structures and issues of the early Stuart period." Political debates after 1660 occurred in "the same language" that had dominated earlier discourse, a language which was predominantly "religious" for "it is the problem of popery which gives the seventeenth-century English experience as a whole (1603–1688) its essential unity."[21]

Recently, perhaps influenced by the reintegration of Britain into the European community, historians – at least of the early Stuart period – have begun to question the insularity of English men and women. Richard Cust has demonstrated that far from being ignorant of, and unconcerned about, national and international political developments, men and women in the English provinces in the 1620s and 1630s were eagerly gathering and analyzing news from London.[22] Under the close scrutiny of Ann Hughes and Clive Holmes the county community has appeared less cohesive and self-contained; its gentry "encouraged broad participation in politics," enjoyed "broad social alliances" and generally "participated in a national

[19] John Miller, *Popery and Politics in England, 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 1.
[20] J. R. Jones, *Britain and the World 1649–1815* (Glasgow, 1980), pp. 12–13.
[21] Jonathan Scott, "Radicalism and Restoration: The Shape of the Stuart Experience," in *Historical Journal* Vol. 31 No. 2 (1988), pp. 458, 460, 462. Scott has elaborated this claim in his *Algernon Sidney*.
[22] Richard Cust, "News and Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England," in *Past and Present* No. 112 (August 1986), pp. 60–90.

political culture."[23] Debates about foreign policy, Tom Cogswell has shown, were far from peripheral concerns to county communities but rather were conducted with enthusiasm, sophistication, and spontaneity outside of Parliament. Most English men and women were much more than lukewarm about English involvement in the Thirty Years War.[24] Caroline Hibbard's valuable study of court Catholicism in the years just before the outbreak of the Civil War has suggested powerfully that "antipopery as a political-religious phenomenon ought to be approached from an international and London perspective." It was precisely the awareness of English men and women of the successes of Counter-Reformation Catholicism which made Laudianism and court philo-Catholicism appear as the first steps down the slippery slope to Popery.[25] Finally Peter Lake has carefully unraveled the language of anti-Popery to show that it was an "ideological tool" rather than "a wholly irrational and unitary thing." Significantly Lake has suggested that "along with other fixed points on the polemical map, anti-popery was transformed by the turmoil of the interregnum and thus made available as a free-floating term of opprobrium."[26] It is precisely this variability of the language of anti-Popery that allowed English men and women to integrate concerns with the outside world with their own local experiences.

These important reassessments of early Stuart political culture seem to call for a reinvestigation of English foreign relations after 1650. Indeed the first two Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652–1654 and 1664–1667) seem to be the ideal testing ground for these various understandings of English political culture. If English men and women desired so desperately to avoid paying extraordinary taxes, why did England go to war so often after 1650? Why, if English national identity was so closely bound up with its Protestantism, did the nation go to war three times against the Protestant Dutch from 1652 to 1674? How could Englishmen who understood the world in terms of the binary opposites of Popery and Protestantism justify war, not once but three times, against a fellow Protestant nation?

Historians have offered two sorts of explanations. One group, building on nineteenth-century claims that the seventeenth century laid the foundations for England's commercial empire, has argued that, despite similarities in religion, the English and the Dutch were first and foremost economic

[23] Ann Hughes, "Local History and the Origins of the Civil War," in Ann Hughes and Richard Cust (editors), *Conflict in Early Stuart England* (London, 1989), p. 249; Clive Holmes, "The County Community in Stuart Historiography," in *Journal of British Studies* Vol. 19 No. 2 (spring 1980), p. 73; Ann Hughes, *Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620–1660* (Cambridge, 1987).

[24] Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621–1624* (Cambridge, 1989).

[25] Caroline M. Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (Chapel Hill, 1983), p. 4.

[26] Peter Lake, "Anti-Popery: The Structure of a Prejudice," in Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (editors), *Conflict in Early Stuart England* (London, 1989), p. 96 and *passim*.

competitors. Economic pressure groups ultimately pushed England to war. These pressure groups, it is claimed, were able to persuade regimes as different as the Rump and the Restored Monarchy to pursue the same policy because that policy represented the true national interest. A second group of scholars, by contrast, has suggested that the wars had little to do with any conception of national interest. Instead the wars were the outward reflection of power struggles at court. One faction or another would opportunistically become an advocate of an Hollandophobic foreign policy – in full confidence of the support of a xenophobic populace – in order to topple their rivals from the pinnacle of political influence.[27]

The best means to test these hypotheses is to construct a dense narrative based upon placing the diplomatic negotiations surrounding the outbreak and conclusion of the first two wars in the context of contemporary political and religious debates. The first part of the book, then, explores the causes of the first Anglo-Dutch War. The second part explains the complicated diplomatic maneuvers that put an end to that war in April 1654. The third part provides an explanation for the outbreak of the second Anglo-Dutch War, while the final part details the causes and consequences of the infamous and devastating Dutch raid on the Medway in June 1667. Despite their narrative structures, the discussions in each part explore larger questions about the nature of English political culture. Was English foreign policy created on the basis of an uninformed xenophobia or a sophisticated understanding of European politics? Did popular opinion matter in the making of English foreign policy, or did foreign policy remain the preserve of the king and the aristocratic factions? Did the language of political culture – the meaning of anti-Popery, for instance – remain unchanged throughout the seventeenth century or did the convulsions of the mid-century precipitate a series of political redefinitions? This study, then, aims not only to reexamine seventeenth-century Anglo-Dutch relations, but also to explore the content, meaning, and significance of English political ideologies in an age of revolution.

[27] These interpretations are obviously oversimplified. They receive fuller, and fairer, treatment, I hope, in the introductory paragraphs of each section of the book.